

STATEMENT ON H.R. 4681

HON. BETTY McCOLLUM

OF MINNESOTA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, April 27, 2006

Ms. McCOLLUM of Minnesota. Mr. Speaker, would like to enter into the record my views on a bill that was marked-up in the International Relations Committee on April 6, 2006, H.R. 4681, The Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006. I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to Chairman HENRY HYDE for his wisdom and determined effort to temper H.R. 4681 to reflect the shared commitment of members of the U.S. House to ensure Israel's security, combat terrorism and work towards a peaceful two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinian people. Despite Chairman HYDE's noblest efforts, I unfortunately believe the substance of the legislation as put before the committee will not help the U.S. advance our vital interests in the Middle East and therefore I cannot support the bill in its current form.

Among our colleagues in the U.S. House, there is unanimous intolerance and condemnation for the Hamas-led government of the Palestinian Authority. The refusal of the political leadership of Hamas to recognize the State of Israel, renounce violence and terrorism, and agree to previous agreements and obligations of the Palestinian Authority is unacceptable and therefore they must be isolated by the international community. Congress should be extending our support for the Bush administration's current position of leading the international community to keep firm pressure on Hamas until they agree to an internationally recognized civilized standard of conduct. At the same time, Congress must work with the administration and the international community to avoid a serious humanitarian crisis among the Palestinian people.

Unfortunately, instead of advancing the U.S. interests, H.R. 4681 does not recognize the three criteria set forth by President Bush for engagement with the U.S. H.R. 4681 sets an elevated threshold which will make engagement nearly impossible even if Hamas does agree to recognize Israel, renounce terrorism and agree to abide by all previous agreements. The policy outcome of H.R. 4681 would not only isolate Palestinian leaders who have been committed to advancing the peace process, have denounced terrorism and are working with Israel for a permanent two-state solution, it will result in the isolation of the U.S. among members of the international community that are working for a peaceful and just solution between Israel and the Palestinians.

This bill also places extreme constraints on the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people which has the potential for very negative human consequences. Palestinian families and children must not be targeted for deprivation of their basic human needs, but instead treated in a fashion that reflects our values and the belief that their lives are valued. Non-governmental organizations (representing many of our faith communities) with significant experience delivering humanitarian assistance have expressed serious concerns regarding the lack of flexibility in H.R. 4681. An April 6, 2006 letter from the United States Conference on Catholic Bishops to

Chairman HYDE expressing concerns regarding the substitute amendment to H.R. 4681 states, "the legislation should provide for the urgent needs of the Palestinian people. A further deterioration of the humanitarian and economic situation of the Palestinian people compromises human dignity and serves the long term interests neither of Palestinians nor of Israelis who long for a just peace."

Mr. Speaker, I am submitting the text of the letter from the Catholic Bishops Conference for the record as well.

In its present form, this bill will not allow NGOs to properly carry out the very assistance determined to be necessary by the Secretary of State. It would be my hope that this is not an attempt to intentionally make it prohibitively difficult for NGOs to fulfill their contracts, thus ensuring suffering and misery among the Palestinian people, but rather a failure in drafting the bill that can be remedied as the legislative process proceeds.

The inclusion of the section of the bill targeting the United Nations agencies and programs, section 4, is very disappointing and clearly not intended to advance the peace process or the well-being of Israelis or Palestinians. The United Nations, as a member of the Quartet, has a vital role to play in ensuring humanitarian needs are met. To target a member of the Quartet in such a fashion is a clear sign that this bill is intended to undermine the Bush administration's multilateral leadership. This section has no positive effect on the policy goal stated in section 2 of the bill and will likely isolate the U.S. in the future. This entire section of the bill must be removed.

There are other aspects of this bill which I disagree with because I believe they harm U.S. interests. Fortunately, some of my remaining concerns regarding the bill are appropriately addressed in S. 2370, as introduced in the U.S. Senate, which I feel provides the President appropriate flexibility to positively advance U.S. interests with regard to the Palestinian Authority and the peace process.

Finally, my opposition to H.R. 4681 is based on policy grounds that reflect my support for a Middle East peace process which will ultimately yield security and freedom from terrorism for the people of Israel and a democratic, secure and peaceful Palestinian state. H.R. 4681, in its current form, will result in no greater security or opportunities for peace than exist today with current law and the administration's present policy course, but may in fact have the result of destabilizing the current situation while fueling a humanitarian crisis. It would be my hope that this legislation will be amended and improved as the process moves forward. Advancing this bill in its current form undermines U.S. interests, exacerbates a potential humanitarian crisis and has potential long-term negative consequences for the Israeli people and the Palestinians. In its current form, I must oppose H.R. 4681.

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND WORLD PEACE,

Washington, DC, April 6, 2006.

Hon. HENRY J. HYDE,

Chairman, Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 2110 Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2170, Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to express the bishops' concerns regarding the Amendment in the Na-

ture of a Substitute to H.R. 4681, the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006.

The bishops' perspective on this legislation is shaped by two overriding concerns. First, H.R. 4681 should be measured in light of the ultimate goal of promoting a two-state solution that provides security for Israel and a viable state for the Palestinians, two states living alongside one another in peace. Second, the legislation should provide for the urgent needs of the Palestinian people. A further deterioration of the humanitarian and economic situation of the Palestinian people compromises human dignity and serves the long term interests neither of Palestinians nor of Israelis who long for a just peace.

Mr. Chairman, the bishops are grateful that the language of the substitute now acknowledges the goal of a two-state solution, but we remain profoundly concerned that some of the provisions of the bill would directly undermine this goal. For example, the legislation rightly calls upon Hamas to renounce terrorism, recognize Israel and accept prior agreements, including the Road Map, but then forbids contact with the Palestinian Authority, "including the Palestinian Legislative Council" (page 9, lines 15-16) despite the fact that many members of the Council are not members of Hamas or a Foreign Terrorist Organization and have, in fact, renounced terrorism, recognized Israel and supported past agreements. Similarly, in section 7 and 8 the travel and representation of officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the United States is restricted despite the fact that the PLO has renounced terrorism, recognized Israel and negotiated the prior agreements. These actions curtail contact with moderate Palestinian leaders whose support and cooperation are crucial for pursuing a two state solution.

The bishops appreciate the steps you have taken to improve section 3 of the legislation, (e.g., the shortening of notification provisions). However, we remain profoundly concerned with the narrow definition of the exception to limitations on aid to Gaza and the West Bank in subsection (d). Especially given the deepening poverty and unemployment in the Palestinian territories, the exception ought to include more than the provision of services to meet "basic human health needs." The basic human needs of the Palestinian people as they fall into deeper poverty include: "education, job training, psycho-social counseling and other humanitarian needs." The bishops' relief and development agency, Catholic Relief Services, reports that their assistance programs in the Palestinian Territories could be severely curtailed or ended under the proposed legislation. Other reputable, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) report similar concerns.

Another issue related to NGOs is the prohibition on all contact with the Palestinian Authority (PA). Any organization delivering assistance in the West Bank and Gaza will need to have incidental contact with the PA in order to secure permits and conform to legal requirements. This routine, non-substantial contact should not be prohibited.

Attached to this letter you will find some specific language recommendations that the Bishops' Conference believes would help the legislation to meet two important goals supporting a two-state solution to the conflict and alleviating the urgent human needs of the Palestinian people through aid. These goals are in the best interests of both Palestinians and Israelis who long for a just peace.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

THOMAS G. WENSKI,

Bishop of Orlando, Chairman,
Committee on International Policy.